CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT: Problems and Recommendations

Walter E.A. van Beek
with the assistance of
Mirjam de Bruijn and Chris van de Borgh

An old and influential definition of culture by E.B. Tylor described culture or civilisation, 'taken in its wide ethnographic sense' to include 'belief, art, morals, law and any other habit and capability acquired by man as a member of society'. The implicit ideological focus of this classic formulation, though made more than a century ago, can still be heard in the definition of culture that is generally used in development discourse. There too, the core of culture is usually conceived as a system of knowledge and a set of shared ideas. For instance, whenever culture is portrayed as an obstacle to development — as is still quite often the case — the norms and values of the people concerned are usually identified with culture. In current debates on culture, however, it is the instrumental, organisational and material aspects of culture that come to the fore: culture as strategy, as problem-solving device, as survival kit. Thus both conceptions of culture are intermingled in many of the debates on culture and development. While development pragmatists may stress culture as a conservative backdrop, anthropologists try to stress its dynamic, integrative and survival-oriented aspects. What they all share is the notion of relativity: culture is variation, and thus relative. Some regard cultural relativity — with the total spectrum of cultures making up a fundamental wealth of human kind — as one of humankind's (or anthropology's) great achievements. The problem, however, is that cultural relativism is basically an abdication of ethical judgment: a negation of choice that fits well into a situation of non-intervention and existential distance. In as far as the focus on culture implies relativism, a conceptual and practical tension between culture and development arises.

Three issues dominate the field of culture and development: the relation between culture and human rights; the notion of culture as an analytical concept; and culture as an arena. Taken together, the definition and analysis of the problems and the recommendations for strategic action lead to some possible approaches for types of development interaction that take the cultural dynamics into account. The discussions of the articles presented focused both on the analytical problems of each of these issues, and on the practical side, on the programmes and actions to be undertaken.

Human rights and culture, culture and human rights

Human rights have been formulated at several times, in several ways, and from several cultural backgrounds. Despite differences in style and, to a lesser degree, in substance, the general aim of all these formulations is to arrive at wide, universal or semi-universal definitions of human rights. As such, formulations of human rights aim to transcend cultural differences. The a priori assumption is that all cultures are expressions of a shared humanity or variations on themes that are common to us all, despite the sometimes glaringly obvious differences that may separate the strains of humankind so successfully. In one way, this programme of human rights runs counter to the familiar, more or less traditional pursuits of anthropology, in which not only are the vast differences between cultures stressed, but also the pervasiveness of culture, even in the quest for universal values itself, is highlighted. As the fascinating spectre of variety tends to obscure universals, the search for underlying values is a difficult one, especially when any formulation inevitably has its cultural specificity.

Though they are defined as a quest, both jurists and anthropologists agree not only on the need for but also on the existence of universal standards. For a long time anthropologists have acknowledged that any extreme form of 'cultural relativism' starts from self-defeating a priori statements, but also has its inherent limitations to prevent it from becoming totally void. Whatever holds for cultural relativism holds for ethical relativism as well, as both are intrinsically linked. The principal points for discussion are the standards for defining human rights; the relative influence of human rights formulations and culture; and the points where action might be taken.

Standards for defining human rights vary. Some definitions of human values and rights may generate an easy consensus as no defence of the opposite point of view is possible, e.g. the right to life. In such cases, where fundamental rights for individuals run parallel with values of societies, consensus is easy. However, this is often not the case. Human rights charters are marked by internal contradictions, e.g. when the right not be tortured clashes with the right of existence of the larger group. These conflicts become clear in the implementation of specific human rights in particular cases: the relative consensus then rapidly breaks down.

The influence of culture on the definition of human rights makes

itself felt in all this. For instance, the individualistic focus of the general declaration reflects the Western value of the individual as the main bearer of culture and tradition. Alternative declarations of human rights, in effect, have placed more stress on the rights of larger groups (families), and have formulated the duties of the individual as a concomitant part of human rights. Moreover, the whole search for these universals, indeed the very posing of the question, plus the notion that such a declaration might be effective as an instrument, bear the characteristics of Western and Northern culture, with its universalistic legalism, its belief in the written word, and its inclination towards secular values. Similarly, if internal conflicts between rights have to be solved, the hierarchy of values follows the lines set by the culture that is dominant in the discourse.

Discussions of this topic stress both this fact and the involvement of culture in the implementation process, where the intermingling of the particular and the universal is complete. For instance, the uncontested value of life could be specified in the more culture-bound notion of 'dignity of life', to be implemented either as abortion or as anti-abortion, as euthanasia or as extreme medicalisation. One option mentioned is that the choice for either universalism or particularism is not required, but that a better theory of culture might solve this problem.

However, not tackling the problem may mean a new kind of paternalism, where interventions on behalf of human rights issues are shunned because of idiosyncratic values, thereby withholding rights from people. The discussions raised the abuse of relativism by oppressive regimes. 'This is our culture and our custom' can be a statement of political territoriality, a definition of 'internal affairs.' So the other side of the coin, the influence of human rights on culture, incites a cultural critique of two sorts. First, extremes in cultural behaviour, such as extremes in oppressive behaviour, can and should be put under scrutiny to be judged by peers who do not share the same culture. Torture is a case in point, like violence against women, child abuse, etc. However, as elsewhere, it is extremely difficult to draw a line between issues that generate an easy consensus and those in which the internal logic of local culture leads to practices that in themselves are reprehensible to outsiders. Female excision was discussed as a borderline case for some. Anyway, it is not clear to what extent this 'internal cultural logic' can be upheld to legitimate individual practices, and here the 'outsiders' often part company with the culture's 'insiders'. *Purdah* and *suttee* offer good examples of this kind of culturally hallowed but internationally condemned behaviour.

It therefore became clear that in human rights, despite its inherent cultural implications, no strategy of 'masterful inaction' is defensible. One question is: whose rights? The discussion so far has mainly been between governments and about governments. This implies both a simplification of the problem and its politicisation. The concept of cultural rights might be used to counteract this, in order to stress the rights of minority groups, allowing them access to their self-definition. However, the concept has its inevitable drawbacks, as the self-promotion of minorities is one of the main problems of today. The same holds for economic minorities, though the right to dissociate from economic monopolies is less contested.

Like any general rule — and no charter is more general than the human rights charter — its importance lies in its implementation. Application of rules in any specific situation calls for compromises between conflicting values, between the values of different parties, between cultural alternatives and alternative cultures. Compromise is inevitable, but also very human. This does not imply that general values are invalid, for — to turn the tables — what would be the alternatives to the values and rights formulated? It implies that casuistics have to develop in order to fill some of the semantic void inevitably left by the general formulation.

Conceptions of culture

In discussion of culture and development, culture is often treated as a self-evident entity, a closed set of norms, values, relations and responses that is (or should be) relevant for every member of the culture-bearing group, and may become clear for any discerning, empathic outsider. In local cultures this is often tied to the concept of tradition, handed down from generation to generation, with its implication of timelessness, unchanging adherence to time-honoured rules and respectability. This view of culture has been abandoned by anthropologists during the last few decades. For (post)modern anthropology, culture is a construct, which is reinvented both in the interaction between members of a community and in the encounter with observers from outside that community. It is an emergent phenomenon, resulting from the continuous process of defining reality in action and discourse. Part of this process is a repertoire of options for choosing, for problem-solving, for assessment of interest, as exemplified in coping and survival mechanisms, or in the dynamism of learning experiences. Tradition, in this view, is one possible self-definition of this repertoire, in which the emic ideology of timelessness may serve as a mechanism for the legitimation of present behaviour.

This has serious implications for culture and development dynamics, but it might also alleviate some of the problems mentioned above. Cultural

differences are seen as variations of the very human proclivity to produce and construct culture; the differences between 'cultures' are the result of long series of changes, of 'adaptive radiation' in cultural evolution. Globalisation, discussed below, is just one of the examples of convergence. Differences are created by varying exposure to changing influences, including other cultures, and by varying productivity in different fields of action. Different aspects of these cultural constructs are re-created at different rates and speeds, resulting in a 'cultural lag' whenever change in the rebuilding of culture in one field outstrips change in a more or less related field. One particular version of the cultural lag is the 'moral lag', whenever issues perceived as general morality have to catch up with a run-away technology, for example. Medical ethics are replete with this kind of problem.

For culture this implies a limited holism: on the one hand, people tend to coordinate their choices and strategies, so that some integration is to be expected and may be constructed: 'culture has no spare parts'. On the other hand, contradictions do exist within cultures, due both to differential change and to more fundamental pre-existing contradictions. Reports stressing 'harmony', 'integration' and 'cooperation', especially in local cultures, are regarded with increasing suspicion, as these constructs are better explained by analysing the observers than the observed. In fact, if culture has to be taken seriously in development, these exaggerations have to be combatted strongly. Nor should an appeal to 'culture' or 'tradition' gloss over internal differences, systems of exploitation or oppression, or variations in small-scale societies. Finally, the notion of culture should not be used to construct just another we/they distinction, as yet another way of dividing the world in purportedly homogeneous regions.

The implications of this approach to culture and development emerge, as always, in the practical implementation of programmatic approaches. Local knowledge, for instance, increasingly comes to the fore as one of the spearheads of culture and development. The use of local knowledge in, for instance, agricultural development has virtually become a truism in discussions of culture and development (which does not imply that local knowledge is de facto written into project proposals and terms of reference, of course). A series of questions then arises: Whose knowledge? What part and portion of the society? Mediated by whom, and constructed in what fashion? Culture as a construct implies knowledge as a product of interaction, especially knowledge systems as a construct. Local knowledge indeed often appears to be highly context-dependent, emerging in interaction with the environment, implicit and changeable, with very limited integration, open to arguments and influences from different areas of culture. The problem of mediation is thus a double one, from context to emic formulation, and from formulation to cross-cultural translation. Such a double-bind complicates the interaction implicated in culture and development to a considerable extent. If the culture and development dynamics assume the integration of different cultures — and with the constantly postulated opposition between donor and host cultures it is difficult not to do so — then this presents a serious problem. The notion of the accumulation or blending of cultures, an ideal which went out of fashion in the days of colonial anthropology, is not a programme close to the present-day culture theory. Not only the paradigmatic differences between the cultures concerned, but essentially the very notion of culture as an emergent construct, render this programme highly questionable. Nor is it only in the field of local knowledge that this quest emerges. Similar notions are voiced in health issues, educational practices and institutional adaptation. For instance, much of the current discussion of medical interventions and the debates in medical anthropology centre on the (im)possibility of integrating traditional health care practices with the 'cosmopolitical' system.

Some believe that the dilemma might be overcome by putting cultural problems at the end of the development trajectory. Why not start with the practical problems defined by the actors in the field, and then branch out in the research and analysis to gradually encompass all relevant aspects, possibly including culture? Such an approach, despite its actor-orientation and problem-orientation, may work as a programme for research in those few cases where the research team has plenty of time and reasonably ample funds and can command a large range of expertise. Ecological research has shown this to be a productive strategy, especially when dealing with urgent, clear-cut problems such as insect pests or cattle vaccination (but even then ...). However, not all of these requirements are met in the implementation of interventions, nor for that matter in most research endeavours. Ideally, of course, interventions should follow intense study, for instance of the kind cited above, but ideals are seldom met.

Another complication (or fact of life) is that the definition of most problems, both by the actors and by others, is bound to culture, dependent on local value hierarchies. Furthermore, in the assessment of success the criteria for judging whether the problems have been solved or not are culture-specific. Efficiency and effectivity, for instance, measured by donors primarily in terms of production, can meet with quite different interpretations, as, for instance, institutional and relational values are given a much higher rating in local culture. Still, the notion of tying culture to event and event to culture is a productive one, as the difference between the two is hard to maintain in modern anthropological thinking. Nor should cultural sensitivity lead to

glossing over of differences and variations within the local communities and cultures. It is all too easy to use the concept of culture to 'explain away' the differences between people. Making use of culture in development should imply a mixture of local rules and norms, individual idiosyncrasies, historical and environmental contexts and variations, implying a historical and personal sensitivity within the general empathy for a differing culture. This is not easy to achieve, let alone to prescribe.

3. Culture as an arena

Culture runs the risk of being used as a panacea for a failing development strategy. The inclusion of cultural specificities in the current paradigm of development planning is not what the participants aim at: 'add culture and stir', will not work (just as 'add women and stir' did not work either). A central part was occupied in the debates by the issue of power: what power relations operate within cultures; how does culture as a phenomenon become a pawn in power brokerages; and in what ways does the inclusion of cultural dynamics lead to the empowerment of various groups? This issue is an octopus, branching out in all directions of the development issue. Closely linked to these topics are the problems connected with the gender issue. The multiple dependencies of women and the structural imbalances between the genders not only bear the general characteristics of power imbalances in society, but they also touch on the very notion of the validity and dignity of cultures, the human rights issue. It is in the realm of the distribution of power that romantic notions about local and regional cultures — in fact any culture — break down, for even given the holistic image of cultures, 'no single culture can be trusted'. Like governments, any kind of system needs countervailing powers. Here the old Aristotelian adage might be paraphrased: What governments need is not necessarily what governments want, or, in the words of the participants: 'Governments do not like the music coming out of civil society'. Cultures tend to legitimate imbalances of power, providing a ready ideological mystification through pervading definitions of the situation. For example, in the many cases in which abuse of women is legitimated by tradition, one should ask: What cultural reasoning would condone the beating of men by their wives? One notion arising from the debates is that cultures might provide countervailing powers to each other, both through the kind of cultural critiques mentioned above, and through the systems of power that are inherent in the cultures themselves. One specific instance that was debated quite strongly was the institution of *talak*, the formula with which a Moslem husband can reject his wife. Though this part of the Islamic system is heavily shielded by cultural and religious norms, international discussions still manage to shift its application and its legitimation.

Countervailing powers between and within cultures, or between and within governments, depend on variations of empowerment. First of all, an actor-orientation in policy and implementation and in development planning and ideology is essential. The actor, of course, is a vague concept in itself, and encompasses the recipient of aid, the local population (as a conglomerate of individuals), officials at various echelons of government organisations, and the manifold personnel of NGOs. The latter type of organisation is often posited as a countervailing power to governments, in many cases rightly so. However, it is not very difficult to find examples of NGOs as bureaucratic power structures in themselves, or even of NGOs with more power than a government.

Within culture, the dominant paradigm is that of the economy (plus technology) as a central force, often running off on its own and following its own dynamics and strategic agenda, with other aspects of culture trailing behind. As most agreed, technology and production do provide their own motor, but they lack steering. This implies not only the 'cultural lag' mentioned above, but also a power relation: cultures should provide countervailing powers against the dominance of economics. Though this dominance does not seem to hold in all cultures (in some countervailing powers against religion are scarce), it is highly relevant in development interactions. Democratic procedures, both in institutions and in governments, do not seem sufficient safeguards against it. Only too often democratic institutions are themselves dominated by techno-economic motives, so people's interests shift when their position in the arena changes. Other forces are needed: ideology might provide alternatives (but in itself has to be checked as well); a wide range of interest groups should strive for empowerment; and a constant assessment of the consequences of development should be taken, paying special attention to the unintended consequences of any development. Special attention has to be given to the systems of the dissemination of information, as power structures and imbalances tend to correlate closely with access to relevant information and the capacity to evaluate and process it.

So in our conceptions of culture, the notions of power, imbalance, countervailing powers and vistas for control have to become clearer. In fact, they have to become part and parcel of any inclusion of cultural dynamics in development planning and interventions. Without an analysis of relations of power, of the impact of interventions on these relations and vice versa, or of the (im)balances of power on the implementations, the outcome of deve-

lopment efforts will remain dominated more by unintended effects than planned results. In itself, this need not be a bad thing. Norbert Elias argued that any game of chess (or draughts) is the unintended outcome of conflicting goals, and in fact may constitute a thing of great beauty. Given the top-down procedures in development planning, unintended effects are to be expected and even applauded. However, too many of the unintended consequences are detrimental, and often irreversible; the ecological and socio-cultural effects of large-scale dams, for instance, offer clear examples.

4. Development and Culture, Culture and Development

If we define development as 'change, more or less planned, more or less desired', then development efforts should lead, somehow or other, to the enhancement of human capabilities. Education, in fact, offers some paradigm as part of a larger system of change. If the enhancement of human capabilities itself is taken as the measuring rod, development might well prove to be an illusion that is ethnocentric, centred on the twentieth century, perhaps the result of a specific discourse which will collapse under linguistic scrutiny. The different definitions of development by donors and receivers are revealing. However, with the more modest option of 'directional change' some productive inclusion of cultural dynamics might prove possible. Clearly, all discussants agree, development is a continuing process from which no culture, society or individual is exempt. It is a process for all, for who can say who is to be 'developed'? So reciprocity is an integral part of the process, with developers and developed as two sides of the same coin. Not only is reciprocity a fact to be reckoned with; it should become a guiding principle in planning. Some equity is needed in order to attain some balance in the generalized reciprocity that characterizes culture-sensitive development approaches. What kind of development efforts, what kind of procedures, and what guidelines to develop these procedures follow from the long list of desiderata that make up the culture and development angle?

First are communication and information. As many more groups, factions and interests are involved in any project than can be foreseen in the planning stage, communication about and within the project is of prime importance. The many ways of defining the problem, views of the feasibility and aptness of solutions, and accounts of the relevant costs in any multicultural situation must and should result in variety and differences in aims, goals, procedures and options for action. This communication is almost by definition a multicultural one, involving members of different cultures and subcultures. The project, in fact, is an attempt at wish-fulfilment, but wishes, dreams and desires vary between the cultures and positions. Intra-project communication is strewn with pitfalls. One point of action is a linguistic analysis of terms, expressions and symbols used by the various parties in the process. This often provides an easy point of entry into the different world views and project views of the people concerned. Not only do concepts have to be translated and analysed, but information too, in whatever form, is culture-specific. The information used, interpreted and processed from the top down has to be translated, adapted and submitted to a quite different processing at the receiving end. Not only translation but also networking and diffusion must receive more attention. Vice versa, the definition of problems and wishes by the host population require just as much re-culturation if they are to become understandable for planners. National or regional governments, and in many cases NGOs as well, are not the vehicles for this endeavour. In fact, they often constitute a third party with its own culture and its own priorities. The fact that they are allowed to think of themselves as the interpreters only increases misunderstanding.

The next issue is 'positionality', as it has been called in the discussions. Each of the participants is required to display a certain amount of 'culture sensitivity', i.e. openness to the validity of other positions, grounded in other value systems and ways of living. The most immediate form of positionality is the old Socratic demand 'know thyself', as realisation of one's cultural boundedness is essential. Analyses of corporate culture, the culture of bureaucracy, for example, are in this respect just as important as the background studies of local cultures. Besides, this demand is often directed only at the planning level, but equity demands that the local actors in the process be as much aware of culture and cultural differences as anyone else. In fact, 'target populations' (a horrible term, negating all reciprocity and equity) are often much more aware of the subtleties of cultural differences, and may lack the notion of superiority of their own way of life. Realising one's own agenda in order to understand the agenda of the others is therefore needed. It should be realised that any kind of communication about and in the project or programme is inevitably cross-cultural communication, and should be addressed as such.

A third general point of action is equity. The process of development should valorise the community, boost self-confidence, enhance deliberate choice and integrate as many people into the process as possible. Interactive training might be needed, as well as maximization of selective participation (selective, as the parties concerned must have the option of opting out, of non-participation, depending on the issue in question). The example of pastoralists

paying government employees not to vaccinate their cattle highlights the fact that the definition of the local situation is often more correct at the base level. A multiple approach is considered essential for this, involving all of the parties concerned — local groups (in all their variety), NGOs, planners, government officials, academics — as early as possible in the design and implementation of programmes and projects. The realisation that all have different stakes in the development is crucial, as is the fact that these stakes, though all bear their own legitimacy, operate from different positions of power.

It should be clear from these guiding principles that involving cultural dynamics in the development process is not a question of adding a few points to a checklist. 'Add culture and stir' will not work. Most agree that culture should be the starting point in order to change the present disastrously low effectivity rate into something more positive. Including cultural dynamics, however, means a radical change in the development policy, much more than drawing up a C-test for official use. Culture is a process, and involving culture in development implies the shift from goal-oriented planning to process-oriented planning with open ends and branching goals. Projects and programmes become unpredictable, with misty goals and fuzzy means. How to handle this unpredictability, with its problematic lack of accountability, in development bureaucracies is a moot but very relevant question. After all, this viewpoint leads to the adage: 'an intervention implemented as planned has failed'.

There are some elements beyond the structures of bureaucracy that may contribute to this open-process planning. Many have been mentioned already in passing. Participation by as many groups as possible as early as possible is one. Speaking of interventions, small-scale interventions offer far better chances than large projects. Building on local successes and building on the past experiences become easier when these two criteria are met. Though reliance on past performance is generally accepted, the main problem has always been how to enlarge the scale, how to expand the scope of small-scale successes. The answer is that this should be avoided. The time-scale is important as well. The example of a Sahelian reforestation programme that had to show results in two years may sound extreme, but in practice time-scales have been too small. Long-term processes are called for, leading to long-term commitments. One reason for this is the need to develop the relational and institutional aspects of interventions: the partners in the process have to develop a culturally accepted relation and to embed themselves in culturally viable institutions. Another point of action is the need for (more) integrated endeavours, in which the communities involve as many aspects of their culture, and as many facets of their complicated coping mechanisms as are deemed feasible. A general learning approach, instead of the dominant teaching paradigm, is a prerequisite for all this, with as open a flow of information as cultural diversity allows.

Thus culture may well become the Trojan horse of development. Hailed as a new altar on which to sacrifice to the god of development, it eventually destroys the walls of bureaucracy to deliver the civilized Troy of development agencies to the vagaries of cultural anarchy. Perhaps this is the ploy of action groups, NGOs, anthropologists, linguists, and theologians as well. Having hammered so long on the impenetrable walls of development organisation, they have at last left the field, leaving that simple notion of culture behind to be included in the planning processes. But in the belly of that notion, they smuggle in the forces that may threaten the ordered existence of that huge, walled city.